Title: Platforms Without Witness: How the Collapse of Relational Infrastructure Drives Dysfunction in Digital Hiring Markets

Subtitle: Principle 6 of the Theory of Online Market Gravity — Emotional Infrastructure Is Economic Infrastructure

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Abstract

Digital hiring platforms promised efficiency, access, and scale — yet their architectures have dismantled the relational infrastructures that historically sustained trust, coordination, and adaptive tension in labor markets. This paper introduces Principle 6 of the *Theory of Online Market Gravity*: emotional infrastructure is economic infrastructure.

Building on Principle 5 (*Conditional Belonging*), this paper argues that platforms systematically suppress peer witness and the relational rituals — gossip networks, shared narratives, closure signals, and collective meaning-making — that once mediated identity and belonging in hiring. The resulting "witness gap" produces two interlocking failures:

1. Emotional fragmentation — job seekers experience prolonged uncertainty, identity strain, and collective invisibility as adaptive rituals collapse.
2. Economic inefficiency — degraded signals, ghost job proliferation, over-application churn, and extended unemployment cycles emerge as structural features rather than anomalies.

This paper demonstrates that digital platforms' design choices are not neutral: by abstracting identity into data, privileging engagement over resolution, and removing feedback loops, they produce cascading harms at individual, institutional, and macroeconomic levels. By reframing relational infrastructures as foundational market infrastructure, this paper shows that repairing

hiring dysfunction requires restoring witness systems — mechanisms for visibility, closure, and collective meaning-making — at platform scale.

This paper positions the *witness gap* as a central explanatory mechanism for systemic instability in digital labor markets and proposes design and governance pathways to realign platform incentives with adaptive market function.

1. Introduction

(Principle 6: Emotional Infrastructure Is Economic Infrastructure)

Digital hiring platforms promised a revolution. By collapsing geographic barriers, aggregating opportunities, and matching candidates at scale, they positioned themselves as the natural solution to labor market inefficiency (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Srnicek, 2017). Instead, they have engineered something paradoxical: systems that promise connection yet produce isolation, opacity, and systemic churn (Gray & Suri, 2019; Gillespie, 2018).

This paper introduces Principle 6 of the Theory of Online Market Gravity: emotional infrastructure is economic infrastructure. While the first four principles diagnose the structural mechanics of platform dysfunction and Principle 5 (Conditional Belonging) explains why job seekers engage in costly performative rituals to remain "eligible" for scarce opportunities (Bourdieu, 1984; Hochschild, 1983), this paper goes one level deeper:

When platforms sever the relational rituals and peer witness systems that once mediated identity, belonging, and meaning in hiring, they destabilize the emotional scaffolding that markets rely on to function (Collins, 2004; Goffman, 1959).

This paper calls this phenomenon the witness gap — the widening absence of shared visibility, solidarity, and validation in digital hiring environments. Historically, local labor markets contained rich relational infrastructures: coworkers debriefed failed interviews, peer gossip signaled which companies to avoid, mentors translated opaque practices, and community rituals helped individuals metabolize rejection (Putnam, 2000; Granovetter, 1973).

Even when hiring was unequal, these systems preserved collective meaning-making and maintained adaptive tension: feedback circulated, norms were visible, and trust — however partial — had relational anchors.

Platform-Mediated Erosion of Relational Infrastructure

Digital hiring platforms dismantle this infrastructure in two interlocking ways:

1. Abstracting job seekers into datapoints — Algorithmic matching systems and infinite-scroll job boards flatten identity into keywords, suppress voice, and strip away visible markers of belonging or contribution (Gray & Suri, 2019; Barley, Bechky & Milliken, 2017).

2. Erasing witness — Job seekers navigate applications, rejections, and prolonged unemployment in isolation. No shared signals circulate; no rituals mediate exclusion; no community structures stabilize meaning (Gillespie, 2018).

Consequences of Witness Collapse

This erosion has two interconnected consequences:

- Emotional fragmentation — Individuals lose peer validation and solidarity, experiencing prolonged uncertainty, identity strain, and collective invisibility (Hochschild, 1983; Collins, 2004).
- Economic inefficiency — When emotional infrastructure collapses, information flow breaks down, signal clarity erodes, and market matching quality declines. Ghost jobs proliferate, churn accelerates, and structural unemployment deepens (Akerlof, 1970; Kalleberg, 2018).

These failures are not accidental; they are designed consequences of platform architectures that monetize engagement while suppressing resolution (Srnicek, 2017; Rahman, 2022).

Contributions of Principle 6

Whereas Principle 5 explained why users conform to opaque behavioral norms under conditions of conditional belonging, Principle 6 extends that logic to show how the erosion of meaning-making structures amplifies market dysfunction at scale.

By situating this argument within the Theory of Online Market Gravity, this paper makes three contributions:

1. Naming the witness gap as a critical missing infrastructure in digital hiring markets.
2. Reframing emotional infrastructure — peer validation, shared narratives, and community belonging — as a prerequisite for stable, adaptive labor systems.
3. Demonstrating that platform architectures which dismantle relational rituals generate measurable inefficiencies: degraded signals, prolonged unemployment, and systemic churn.

Ultimately, emotional infrastructure is economic infrastructure. Without mechanisms that preserve visibility, belonging, and collective meaning, digital platforms cannot sustain trust, adaptive tension, or coordinated market behavior. Hiring systems designed without peer witness do not merely harm individual job seekers; they erode the very foundations of labor market coherence.

2.1 Conditional Belonging and Survival-Bonded Communities (Principle 5 Recap)

Definition. Conditional belonging occurs when access to opportunity is contingent on opaque, shifting rules. Users then optimize to remain *eligible* rather than to achieve *resolution*.

Mechanism. Conditional access → behavioral conformity → sustained engagement without outcomes.

Outcomes. (i) private obedience (keywording, aesthetic compliance), (ii) identity strain, (iii) crowding out of peer voice.

Link to P6. When belonging is conditional *and* witness is suppressed, the meaning-making layer collapses, converting emotional fragmentation into economic inefficiency.

Principle 5 introduced the Conditional Belonging Principle, which explains why job seekers persistently conform to platform norms even when those norms fail to produce resolution (Gray & Suri, 2019; Rahman, 2022). Access to opportunity becomes conditional, but belonging itself — the right to remain *"eligible"* for jobs, visibility, or legitimacy — is never secure.

This conditionality produces survival-bonded communities, where identity and behavior are structured less by personal agency and more by the scarcity logic imposed by platforms (Bourdieu, 1984; Hochschild, 1983). In these environments, individuals adapt strategically, not authentically, aligning their actions with opaque rules designed for engagement, not resolution (Srnicek, 2017).

The Vertical Morality Triangle

These belonging systems form around what calls the Vertical Morality Triangle, where inclusion is negotiated through three distinct forms of adaptive solidarity:

- Shared Superiority → Belonging is secured by aligning with perceived status dominance. Job seekers emulate elite aesthetics, language, or credentials to signal membership in "high-value" categories (Goffman, 1959; Bourdieu, 1984).
- Shared Struggle → Belonging emerges through collective narratives of endurance ("we're all suffering together"). Job seekers form micro-communities around burnout stories, resume inflation strategies, and whispered shortcuts for gaming opaque hiring algorithms (Granovetter, 1973; Collins, 2004).
- Shared Deference → Belonging comes from collectively minimizing visibility, performing politeness, and adopting obedience strategies to avoid exclusion from scarce opportunities (Hochschild, 1983; Ridgeway, 2014).

These configurations mimic community but function as scarcity adaptations rather than authentic relational ecosystems. As Bourdieu (1984) shows, access to symbolic capital — here, the appearance of *employability* — determines inclusion into desirable groups, forcing individuals to perform identities they may not inhabit. Hochschild's (1983) work on emotional labor further clarifies how individuals curate affect to remain "desirable" within hierarchical systems. Similarly, Collins (2004) highlights how ritual participation sustains belonging, while Putnam (2000) warns that the erosion of social capital weakens collective resilience.

Digital labor markets amplify these dynamics. As algorithmic scarcity is simulated and belonging becomes performative, job seekers increasingly align their strategies with platform-

encoded norms rather than grounded labor realities, deepening emotional dependency on systems optimized for engagement, not resolution (Gray & Suri, 2019; Kalleberg, 2018).

2.2 Rituals, Witness, and Relational Infrastructure

Relational rituals (operational): repeated micro-practices that (a) circulate signal (who/what to trust), (b) buffer affect (metabolize rejection), and (c) coordinate action (when to persist, pivot, or exit). Examples: breakroom debriefs, informal closure messages, peer warnings, referral vouching, union bulletin gossip, alumni listservs.

Infrastructure claim: These rituals are *infrastructural* when they (i) persist across interactions, (ii) reduce uncertainty for multiple actors, and (iii) leave observable traces (stories, norms, reputations) that future actors can reference. Remove the rituals → remove the routing layer that makes the market legible.

Relational rituals are the hidden scaffolding that sustains trust, meaning-making, and coordination in labor markets. These practices are not ornamental; they are infrastructural (Collins, 2004; Goffman, 1959).

Drawing on Collins' *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004), rituals produce collective emotional energy, identity, and coordinated behavior by generating shared meaning through repeated exchanges. In hiring contexts, these included:

- Breakroom gossip → informal intelligence about who's hiring, layoffs, and employer reputations (Putnam, 2000).
- Peer validation → gestures of empathy after rejection, sustaining individual self-worth (Hochschild, 1983).
- Informal closure → shared stories that metabolize failure and reduce shame (Collins, 2004).

- Coworker solidarity → micro-alliances preserving dignity and agency in environments of structural precarity (Kalleberg, 2018).

Goffman's (1959) work on performance and "social face" shows how identity was co-constructed within these contexts: meaning was negotiated collectively, not privately. When these infrastructures erode, signals stop circulating, expectations destabilize, and individuals are left unable to distinguish personal inadequacy from structural failure (Collins, 2004; Gray & Suri, 2019).

2.3. Platform Architectures and Witness Suppression

Digital hiring platforms dismantle these relational infrastructures through three interlocking design patterns (Gray & Suri, 2019; Gillespie, 2018; Kalleberg, 2018):

1. Removal of Shared Contexts

   Pre-platform hiring relied on environments of mutual visibility, where coworkers, peers, and networks observed and validated hiring outcomes. Platforms abstract these contexts into isolated transactions: applicants apply into a void, invisible to peers (Pasquale, 2015).

2. Algorithmic Flattening of Identity

   Offline, layered cues — recommendations, local reputation, and narrative context — carried meaning. Platforms reduce job seekers to keyword-matched datapoints scored by opaque ATS filters, erasing individuality (Gray & Suri, 2019; Noble, 2018).

3. Suppression of Informal Trust Signals

   Historically, gossip, peer warnings, and shared stories acted as distributed verification networks, enabling job seekers to avoid exploitative employers or scams. Platforms

structurally suppress these signals by offering no employer review standards, no closure tracking, and no collective calibration (Gillespie, 2018; Eubanks, 2018).

This creates an architectural erasure of witness. Without visible peers or shared narratives, users cannot calibrate strategies, metabolize rejection, or recognize systemic patterns (Gray & Suri, 2019). Emotional fragmentation deepens, identity destabilizes, and dependency on the platform increases.

Economically, this suppression drives signal degradation, resume inflation, ghost job proliferation, and systemic churn — showing how emotional fragmentation scales into measurable market dysfunction (Kalleberg, 2018; Autor, 2022).

2.4. Adjacent Relational Markets: Creators, Gig, and Dating

While hiring is the central focus, the witness → ritual → efficiency mechanism extends to other human-relational platform markets:

Creator Markets *(YouTube, TikTok, Substack)*

- Conditional belonging = *algorithmic favor* (Duffy, 2017).
- Witness suppression = shadow bans, asymmetric analytics, limited peer visibility (Abidin, 2021).
- Ritual collapse = loss of creator forums and peer validation channels.
- Economic symptom = content oversupply, CPM compression, and burnout churn (Bishop, 2019).

Gig Markets *(rideshare, delivery)*

- Conditional belonging = acceptance thresholds and activation ratings (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016).
- Witness suppression = isolated dashboards, minimal driver-to-driver coordination (Chen, 2020).
- Economic symptom = oversupply spikes during promos, income volatility, and mis-signaled safety risks (Kalleberg, 2018).

Dating Platforms *(Tinder, Hinge, Bumble)*

- Conditional belonging = desirability rank hierarchies (Rosenfeld, Thomas, & Hausen, 2019).
- Witness suppression = opaque visibility rules and inactive profiles.
- Economic symptom = winner-takes-most matching, sustained engagement without resolution (Ansari, 2015).

This paper centers hiring because job access is survival-bonded: exit costs are highest, identity stakes are deeper, and emotional fragmentation produces direct, measurable market inefficiencies (Gray & Suri, 2019; Kalleberg, 2018).

3. Mechanism: The Ritual Collapse Effect

Principle 6 argues that emotional infrastructure is economic infrastructure: digital platforms cannot sustain coherent labor markets when they dismantle the relational rituals and witness systems that historically mediated identity, belonging, and meaning. This section traces that causal mechanism in three stages:

1. How offline hiring systems once sustained survival-bonded meaning-making.
2. How platform architectures remove witness and suppress collective narrative.
3. How these dynamics accelerate identity erosion and systemic dysfunction, transforming emotional fragmentation into measurable inefficiencies.

3.1 Pre-Platform Rituals: Survival-Bonded Meaning-Making

Before hiring became mediated by algorithmic dashboards and platform metrics, local labor markets relied on distributed emotional infrastructures — everyday rituals through which peers created shared meaning, coordinated information, and metabolized failure. These practices were not decorative; they were functional governance systems that enabled adaptive labor markets (Collins, 2004; Putnam, 2000).

Shared Gossip and Informal Verification

Communities circulated local knowledge about employers: which businesses treated workers fairly, which managers to avoid, which postings were legitimate. These gossip networks acted as informal verification mechanisms, allowing job seekers to avoid exploitative actors and calibrate their efforts intelligently (Granovetter, 1973; Kalleberg, 2018). Where today's platforms deliver "personalized recommendations," small-scale ecosystems relied on peer-validated trust signals.

Informal Closure Through Community Reputation

In pre-platform hiring, failure had meaning. If a candidate was rejected, they often knew why — either through direct feedback from an employer, reputational context from peers, or gossip channels that explained outcomes. Closure didn't eliminate disappointment, but it reduced ambiguity and preserved dignity (Goffman, 1959). Without this meaning-making infrastructure,

rejection today often feels random, producing prolonged shame rather than bounded adaptation (Hochschild, 1983).

Solidarity and Ritual Belonging

In offices, union halls, breakrooms, and local labor pools, peers processed failure together. Small conversations — “They didn’t call me back either,” “That job’s not really hiring anyone” — functioned as solidarity rituals, reducing the psychic cost of exclusion and fostering resilience (Collins, 2004).

Collins’ *Interaction Ritual Chains* explains this mechanism: ritual participation generates collective emotional energy that binds groups, distributes meaning, and sustains motivation. These rituals created communal buffers against uncertainty and scarcity, preserving not just morale but also market efficiency by enabling people to coordinate around reality rather than chasing opaque signals (Collins, 2004; Granovetter, 1985).

3.2 Platforms Without Witness: When Relational Infrastructure Disappears

Digital hiring platforms dismantle the social architectures that historically mediated trust, belonging, and adaptive tension. By replacing communal meaning-making with private dashboards, they create what this paper calls the **witness gap**: the absence of shared validation, collective narratives, and visible peer experience.

Algorithmic Mediation Suppresses Shared Reality

When hiring becomes mediated through dashboards and keyword-scoring systems, three forms of relational infrastructure disappear:

- Peer Validation → Offline, job seekers could confirm whether an opportunity was "real." Online, applicants are left guessing: *Is this job legitimate or a ghost posting?* (Gray & Suri, 2019).
- Feedback Loops → Rejection now happens in silence. Algorithms filter resumes without explanation, leaving applicants without the information needed to calibrate effort or improve strategy (Bogen & Rieke, 2018).
- Collective Narratives → Where breakroom gossip once provided solidarity ("We're all frustrated by this employer"), platforms isolate experiences into private engagement metrics. Shared context dissolves, replaced by silent dashboards and automated notifications (Gillespie, 2018).

Emotional Consequences: Fragmentation and Shame

Without witness, failure becomes personalized. Individuals interpret rejection as a private inadequacy rather than a structural pattern (Hochschild, 1983). This leads to:

- Heightened shame and self-blame.
- Chronic identity fragmentation — uncertainty about where one belongs, if at all.
- Accelerated burnout and disengagement, as the absence of feedback leads to emotional exhaustion (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014).

This isolation aligns with Hochschild's findings on emotional labor but extends them: where once people managed affect in front of others, platforms force affect regulation in private, stripping away the relational support that sustains resilience (Hochschild, 1983).

Economic Consequences: Systemic Inefficiency

The emotional fragmentation created by the witness gap directly produces market dysfunction:

- Information Asymmetry → Job seekers lack accurate signals about which postings are legitimate, leading to wasted effort (Akerlof, 1970).
- Overapplication & Noise Inflation → In the absence of clear signals, individuals hedge against uncertainty by applying broadly, saturating platforms with volume over fit (Bogen & Rieke, 2018).
- Degraded Trust → Employers stop trusting resumes; job seekers stop trusting postings; recruiters disengage from overwhelmed channels (Kalleberg, 2018).
- Systemic Churn → Hiring slows, vacancy durations lengthen, and unemployment cycles extend — producing measurable inefficiencies at scale (Gray & Suri, 2019).

In platforms designed to maximize engagement, not resolution, opacity isn't a byproduct — it's a feature. The absence of witness doesn't just harm individuals; it destabilizes the entire adaptive function of the market (Gillespie, 2018).

3.3 Job-Seeker Identity Erosion: From "We" to "I"

In dismantling the relational scaffolding of labor markets, digital platforms trigger a deeper transformation in job seekers' self-concepts: the collapse of collective identity into competitive individual performance. Rather than anchoring belonging in shared narratives or professional communities, identity is increasingly organized around algorithmic visibility, individualized metrics, and private compliance with platform rules (Gray & Suri, 2019; Kalleberg, 2018).

From Social Belonging to Competitive Metrics

In offline labor markets, belonging was co-constructed through collective identity markers:

“We’re machinists.” “We’re teachers.” “We’re a union shop.”

These narratives situated individuals within relational ecosystems of meaning and solidarity (Collins, 2004; Putnam, 2000). Digital hiring platforms displace these community-based narratives with quantified performance metrics: profile completion scores, keyword-match percentages, application counts, and engagement rankings. Applicants are evaluated not in relation to peers but against invisible, shifting algorithmic thresholds (Gillespie, 2018; Pasquale, 2015).

This shift erodes both collective sense-making and the horizontal trust networks that once mediated belonging.

Private Obedience Without Communal Processing

Where solidarity once mediated exclusion, platforms now enforce private obedience. Job seekers are compelled to adapt their strategies in isolation, attempting to “hack” algorithms through résumé keywording, aesthetic compliance, AI-assisted prompts, and other performative tactics (Hoffman et al., 2022). However, these behaviors often occur without collective discussion of meaning or efficacy, creating a misalignment between effort and outcomes.

This produces three interrelated consequences:

- Strategic mimicry without context → Users optimize for eligibility signals rather than genuine fit, performing algorithm-friendly behaviors even when ineffective (Bourdieu, 1984).

- Loss of collective bargaining power → The erosion of shared narratives and solidarity removes coordinated resistance to exploitative practices like ghost jobs, unpaid trial work, and endless application churn (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018).
- Isolation within collective failure → Individuals experience systemic dysfunction as personal inadequacy, perpetuating cycles of shame while reinforcing dependence on the very platforms generating churn (Hochschild, 1983).

Fragmentation as Business Model

This identity fragmentation is **not accidental**; it aligns directly with platform incentives. By isolating users, platforms generate financial and data-extractive advantages (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019):

- **Increased churn** → Users apply more, click more, and purchase visibility upgrades.
- **Monopolization of knowledge** → Platforms hoard behavioral data on seekers and employers, creating informational asymmetry while withholding structural insights from users.
- **Extraction of emotional energy** → Prolonged uncertainty and "hope labor" (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) keep applicants returning, sustaining engagement while degrading matching efficiency.

This produces a **self-reinforcing failure loop**:
Identity fragments → trust collapses → engagement intensifies → dependency deepens → platform profits rise while systemic dysfunction accelerates.

Summary of the Mechanism

Layer	Before Platforms	Under Platforms	Consequences
Relational Rituals	Shared gossip, closure, solidarity	Silent dashboards, private experiences	Loss of witness
Emotional Infrastructure	Collective meaning, buffered rejection	Isolation, shame, identity fragmentation	Chronic burnout
Market Signals	Peer-verified trust, local calibration	Opaque scoring, algorithmic filtering	Signal degradation
Economic Outcomes	Adaptive matching, reduced churn	Overapplication, prolonged unemployment, systemic inefficiency	Market instability

The **ritual collapse effect** demonstrates that dismantling emotional infrastructure produces cascading economic failures. Without collective witness, job seekers lose calibration, trust fragments, and systemic churn intensifies (Gillespie, 2018; Gray & Suri, 2019). Platforms profit from this fragmentation — but at the cost of labor market coherence.

4. Economic Consequences

Principle 6 argues that the erosion of emotional infrastructure — the relational rituals, peer witness, and shared meaning-making practices that historically mediated labor markets — has measurable economic costs. Platforms promise efficiency but deliver systemic churn: signals fragment, matches stall, and individuals cycle endlessly through opaque, isolating systems (Gray & Suri, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

These dynamics are inseparable from the mechanisms introduced in Sections 2 and 3.

- As Section 2.1 showed, job seekers adapt within vertical morality logics — shared superiority, shared struggle, and shared deference — but platform architectures exploit these strategies, deepening engagement rather than resolution.
- As Section 3.2 demonstrated, dismantling relational rituals produces a witness gap: the absence of peer validation, shared narratives, and closure.
- Section 3.3 revealed how this gap fragments identity, replacing collective belonging with isolated obedience, which cascades into systemic hiring inefficiency.

4.1 Signal Degradation and Market Noise

Digital hiring platforms dismantle the peer-verification systems that once stabilized hiring signals, replacing community-based trust with algorithmic opacity (Gillespie, 2018; Pasquale, 2015).

This breakdown links directly to the witness gap introduced in Section 3.2: without rituals of gossip, informal closure, and peer feedback, applicants lose the calibration tools needed to distinguish legitimate opportunities from “ghost” signals.

The resulting opacity amplifies conditional belonging dynamics from Section 2: users persist in overapplication not because it works, but because eligibility anxiety compels them to perform “employable” behaviors even when signal quality has collapsed (Bourdieu, 1984; Collins, 2004).

4.2 Prolonged Unemployment and Hidden Workers *(integration added)*

Platforms amplify labor-market detachment by isolating job seekers and denying closure.

This invisibility is not accidental; it’s structurally produced by the same witness suppression described in Section 3.2.

Without relational feedback loops, workers cannot adapt strategies or interpret failure collectively — leaving qualified candidates hidden behind opaque ATS filters (Fuller et al., 2021).

Similarly, the vertical morality triangle from Section 2 explains why workers remain trapped in churn cycles:

- In shared struggle, they persist, applying endlessly alongside peers ("We're all fighting the same battle").
- In shared deference, they comply with every new platform demand — keywording, personality tests, unpaid trial work — fearing exclusion if they resist.

These adaptive strategies, once protective, now feed structural inefficiency under algorithmic opacity.

4.3 Ghost Jobs and Inefficient Matching

Ghost jobs — fake, stale, or inaccessible postings — are one of the clearest manifestations of relational collapse.

As established in Section 3.2, the absence of peer-driven rumor networks and shared closure channels removes verification mechanisms entirely. In local hiring ecosystems, gossip and collective knowledge once filtered out "dead leads" before applicants invested emotional and cognitive labor. Platforms replace these horizontal checks with asymmetric information control, keeping seekers in motion without resolution (Gray & Suri, 2019; Gillespie, 2018).

Thus, ghost jobs are not anomalies; they are byproducts of architectures that deliberately sustain conditional belonging while monetizing churn.

4.4 Systemic Fragility: Emotional Harm as Market Harm *(integration added)*

Principle 6 reframes witness collapse as not just an emotional failure but a market design failure.

Section 3.3 showed how identity erosion begins at the individual level: belonging dissolves, collective narratives vanish, and seekers internalize structural dysfunction as personal inadequacy. These micro-level harms aggregate into macro-level fragility: reduced labor force participation, longer vacancy durations, and widespread mismatches between talent supply and demand (Krueger, 2017; Kalleberg, 2018).

Platforms benefit from this systemic instability — extracting value from prolonged engagement and monetizing emotional dependency — but labor markets as a whole lose adaptive capacity. Activity persists, but resolution diminishes.

5. Restoring Witness: Pathways to Intervention

Principle 6 demonstrates that emotional infrastructure is economic infrastructure: when platforms dismantle relational rituals, suppress peer witness, and reduce users to atomized data points, they destabilize trust, fracture coordination, and produce measurable market inefficiencies (Gray & Suri, 2019; Gillespie, 2018).

To repair this, this paper must reintroduce relational infrastructure into digital hiring environments. This section outlines two complementary pathways:

1. Structural redesign of platform architectures, and
2. Emerging proof-of-concept systems like The Job Applicant Perspective (TJAP).

5.1. Designing for Relational Infrastructure

The erosion of peer witness is not inevitable; it is the direct result of platform design choices — including suppressing feedback loops, abstracting identity into keywords, and privileging engagement over resolution (van Dijck, 2013; Srnicek, 2017). To restore market coherence, platforms must embed emotional infrastructure into economic architecture by introducing tools that make users visible to one another and accountable to shared signals (Bauman, 2000; Aral, 2020).

Design Principles for Witness-Restoring Platforms

Transparent Review Systems

Reintroduce reciprocal feedback loops where both employers and job seekers can rate experiences, flag ghost jobs, and verify closure. Like Airbnb and Uber, two-sided review systems create structural accountability and reduce opportunistic behaviors (Sundararajan, 2016; Edelman & Geradin, 2016). This turns opaque systems into legible environments where trust emerges collectively rather than individually.

Peer Validation and Closure

Platforms should make job outcomes transparent: Was this listing filled, expired, or withdrawn? Providing aggregated application-to-hire ratios enables users to calibrate expectations and focus effort effectively (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Closing the feedback loop restores dignity: rejection without explanation breeds shame, but shared visibility transforms failure into collective meaning-making (Hochschild, 1983; Collins, 2004).

Reputational Signals That Scale Horizontally

Currently, hiring operates on a vertical trust model — legitimacy flows from platforms and employers downward rather than circulating among peers. Introducing horizontal trust scaffolds

allows job seekers to share information, review employers, and verify opportunities collectively (Granovetter, 1973; Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002). This reduces noise, amplifies trustworthy signals, and restores conditions for adaptive matching efficiency.

By embedding these features, platforms would no longer optimize purely for volume-based engagement metrics at the expense of coordination quality (Gillespie, 2018). Instead, they could create adaptive ecosystems where emotional and economic signals reinforce each other, stabilizing both individual outcomes and broader market dynamics (Autor, 2022).

5.2. The Job Applicant Perspective (TJAP) as Proof of Concept

While incumbent platforms have strong financial incentives to preserve opacity, third-party systems can serve as corrective infrastructures (Srnicek, 2017).

The Job Applicant Perspective (TJAP) operates as a trust layer rather than a replacement for job boards, demonstrating how restoring peer witness creates both emotional repair and economic efficiency.

TJAP's Approach

Two-Sided Reviews → Restoring Peer Visibility

TJAP allows job seekers to review specific job postings and employer behavior while surfacing employer response rates and closure verification. These iterative feedback loops reduce wasted applications and ghost-job chasing (Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002; Edelman, 2016).

Shared Narratives → Collective Validation

Beyond ratings, TJAP enables narrative-driven feedback. Users share stories of positive and

negative hiring experiences, replacing silent dashboards with patterns of visible success and harm (Collins, 2004; Bauman, 2000).

Feedback Loops → Reducing Noise, Restoring Trust

By aggregating closure data and employer responsiveness, TJAP filters out ghost jobs and realigns seeker attention toward verifiable opportunities. The result is less wasted applicant labor, improved matching accuracy, and reduced systemic churn (Autor, 2022).

Positioning TJAP in the Ecosystem

TJAP is not a replacement job board. Instead, it is a structural intervention designed to repair the trust architecture underpinning digital hiring markets.

By functioning as an overlay on top of existing platforms, TJAP bypasses misaligned incentives and demonstrates that user-driven visibility mechanisms can improve both hiring outcomes and market efficiency (Sundararajan, 2016; Gillespie, 2018).

5.3. From Isolation to Collective Signal

Restoring witness is not just emotional repair — it is a necessary condition for functional markets.

By making peer behaviors visible, outcomes transparent, and collective narratives shareable, redesigned ecosystems can:

- Re-anchor trust in reciprocal feedback loops rather than opaque platform authority (Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002).
- Lower cognitive and emotional burdens for job seekers by clarifying what is real, active, and worth pursuing (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

- Improve hiring outcomes by aligning seeker effort with **credible opportunity signals** (Autor, 2022).

This reframes relational infrastructure as the missing variable in platform economics: without restoring witness, churn persists; with it, markets regain coherence.

Key Insight

Witness is the stabilizer of digital markets.

When platforms suppress relational signals, they create churn, fragment trust, and erode economic efficiency. Restoring peer visibility, collective meaning-making, and horizontal reputational signals is not optional — it is a design imperative for functioning marketplaces (Gillespie, 2018; Srnicek, 2017).

6. Limitations and Future Research

6.1 Scope and Generalizability

This paper advances a theory-first account of how dismantled relational/witness infrastructures generate economic inefficiency in digital hiring markets. While the core mechanism likely extends to other human-relational marketplaces (e.g., gig, dating, creator platforms), our argument is developed around employment systems and U.S.-centric institutional settings.

Cross-national regulatory regimes, labor norms, and platform penetration may alter both magnitude and manifestation of these effects (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Srnicek, 2017). Generalization beyond hiring should therefore be treated as hypothesized, not established.

6.2 Measurement Challenges

A central claim — that emotional infrastructure is economic infrastructure — requires operationalizing constructs that are typically latent:

- Witness/relational infrastructure *(peer validation, shared narratives, closure rituals)*
- Emotional fragmentation *(isolation, shame, identity strain)*
- Market inefficiency *(signal degradation, churn, vacancy duration, mis-match rates)*

Because these constructs cut across disciplines — sociology, HCI, labor economics, and platform studies — building valid, reliable indices will require triangulation and mixed-methods approaches (Bail, 2021; Geiger & Ribes, 2011).

6.3 Causality and Confounds

Observed associations (e.g., higher ghost-job prevalence ↔ longer time-to-hire) risk endogeneity:

- Macroeconomic shocks *(tight/loose labor markets)* can independently affect vacancy duration and job-seeker affect (Autor, 2022).
- Selection effects: distressed seekers may cluster on certain platforms (van Dijck, 2013).
- Concurrent platform changes: ranking tweaks or pricing shifts can confound measured effects (Gillespie, 2018).

Future work should leverage quasi-experimental designs *(difference-in-differences, event studies)*, instrumental variables, and field experiments to separate causal impacts from coincidental correlations (Angrist & Pischke, 2014; Imbens & Rubin, 2015).

6.4 Data Access and Platform Opacity

Key hiring-market indicators — e.g., job closure rates, ATS pass-through rates, resume view events — are opaque and owned by platforms. This limits independent verification and may bias inference toward observable metrics *(applications, clicks)* rather than outcome-oriented measures *(resolution, hires)* (Gray & Suri, 2019; Rahman, 2022).

Partnerships, data-sharing agreements, or user-contributed telemetry (e.g., via TJAP) will be essential for overcoming blind spots created by proprietary data silos.

6.5 Boundary Conditions and Heterogeneity

The theory predicts stronger effects where:

- Stakes are high *(income, identity, status)* and exit costs are steep.
- Feedback asymmetries and algorithmic opacity are greatest.
- Communities have weak offline substitutes for peer witness.

By contrast, effects may attenuate in reputation-dense sectors, union-protected workforces, or closed professional guilds where relational rituals remain intact (Putnam, 2000; Kalleberg, 2018). Mapping these moderators is an empirical priority.

6.6 Alternative Explanations

Competing mechanisms merit testing:

- Skills mismatch and training deficits (Holzer, 2013).
- Employer-side frictions *(budget freezes, headcount controls, compliance burdens)*.
- Attention economics independent of emotion *(two-sided pricing, marketplace liquidity)* (Rochet & Tirole, 2003).

Future modeling should nest these explanations to assess incremental variance explained by relational collapse (Akerlof, 1970; Rothstein, 2021).

6.7 Ethical Considerations

Measuring emotional states, peer narratives, and hiring outcomes introduces serious privacy and dignity risks. Researchers must ensure:

- On-platform consent UX
- Data minimization
- Differential privacy where feasible
- Harm-mitigation protocols for vulnerable populations (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Tufekci, 2014).

6.8 Future Research Agenda

A. Metrics & Instrumentation

- Witness Index → Peer-review density, closure verification rates, employer responsiveness, narrative shareability.
- Signal Quality Score → Hires-to-applications ratio, ATS pass-through rates, expired job-share estimates.
- Emotional Fragmentation Scale → Validated survey instruments *(belonging, perceived opacity, learned helplessness)* linked to behavioral telemetry where consented (Bail, 2021).

B. Experimental & Quasi-Experimental Designs

- A/B tests of witness-restoring features *(closure badges, two-sided reviews, responsiveness scores)* → measure effects on application quality, interview rates, and applicant well-being.
- Natural experiments: platform UI rollouts, policy shocks *(e.g., mandated closure reporting)*, ATS vendor switches; evaluate via DiD and event studies (Card, 1999).

C. Agent-Based & Systems Modeling

Simulate seeker, employer, and platform agents with varying feedback latencies and witness availability to reproduce churn, ghost-job dynamics, and trust collapse (Epstein, 2006).

D. Cross-Market Comparative Work

Parallel studies in gig, dating, and creator markets can test portability of the mechanism and isolate market-specific ritual forms (Srnicek, 2017).

E. Intersectional & Structural Analysis

Operationalize the Vertical Morality Triangle *(shared superiority, struggle, deference)* as measurable orientations; model transitions across identity, class, and structural contexts (Collins, 2004; Hochschild, 1983).

F. Mixed-Methods Deep Dives

Combine ethnographies and digital diary studies of job seeking "in the wild" with platform telemetry to triangulate lived experiences and structural dynamics (Geiger & Ribes, 2011).

G. Governance & Policy Evaluation

Evaluate effects of transparency mandates *(e.g., closure reporting, ATS feedback rights)* and procurement standards for auditability (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Gillespie, 2018).

H. TJAP as Field Laboratory

Pre-register studies using TJAP's features *(closure verification, narrative reviews, employer responsiveness scoring)*.

Primary endpoints: reduced over-application, higher interview yields, improved time-to-signal, and perceived trust gains.

6.9 Threats to Validity

- Construct validity: Ensure witness measures aren't proxies for network size or privilege.
- External validity: Replicate across industries, seniority levels, and geographies.
- Behavioral adaptation: Anticipate gaming of reviews/closure badges; design robust checks (Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002).

6.10 Research Roadmap (Indicative)

- **0–6 months**: instrument design; IRB; pilot surveys; small TJAP feature trials.
- **6–18 months**: multi-site A/Bs; first DiD/natural experiments; preliminary ABMs.
- **18–36 months**: cross-market comparative studies; policy evaluations; synthesis papers linking emotional infrastructure metrics to hiring efficiency at scale.

7. Conclusion

Digital hiring platforms promise connection, efficiency, and opportunity — yet their architectures have dismantled the emotional and relational scaffolding that once sustained trust, coordination, and meaning in labor markets (Gray & Suri, 2019; Kalleberg, 2018).

By removing witnessing rituals — the informal, collective practices through which workers historically validated opportunities, shared narratives, and affirmed belonging — platforms have fragmented human dignity while also producing measurable economic harm (Collins, 2004; Hochschild, 1983).

Across this paper, we've argued that emotional infrastructure is economic infrastructure. The breakdown of relational rituals does not merely create psychological alienation; it degrades market function. Without shared visibility into employer behavior, peer experiences, and collective outcomes, signals become noisy, trust collapses, and matching efficiency deteriorates (Akerlof, 1970; Putnam, 2000).

The result is predictable: prolonged unemployment, "hidden workers" excluded from meaningful participation, ghost jobs that inflate false opportunity, and systemic churn that benefits platforms while destabilizing both workers and employers (Gillespie, 2018; Rahman, 2022).

Principle 6 as a Foundational Extension of the Theory of Online Market Gravity

Within the Theory of Online Market Gravity, Principles 1–4 established the mechanics of platforms — how measurement choices, tension asymmetries, and trust architectures shape market trajectories (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Srnicek, 2017).

Principle 5 introduced the Conditional Belonging Principle, explaining how platform-mediated scarcity drives users into adaptive compliance — even in the absence of successful outcomes (Bourdieu, 1984; Hochschild, 1983).

Principle 6 extends this logic by connecting human systems theory, platform economics, and labor market dysfunction into a unified model:

- Platform design choices have economic consequences — the removal of peer witness is not cosmetic; it dismantles the infrastructure that keeps markets legible and adaptive (Gillespie, 2018; Rahman, 2022).
- Job seekers' struggles are structurally rational, not individual deficits: when platforms suppress collective signals, the emotional fragmentation that follows is predictable and designed (Hochschild, 1983; Gray & Suri, 2019).
- The erosion of relational scaffolding — once maintained by communities, newspapers, and workplaces — emerges as a primary driver of instability in digital labor markets (Putnam, 2000; Kalleberg, 2018).

By demonstrating that emotional systems and economic systems are co-constitutive, Principle 6 closes a conceptual gap in labor economics and platform governance. It situates emotional belonging and collective meaning-making as structural preconditions for functional marketplaces

Toward Restoring Emotional and Economic Coherence

If digital platforms destabilize markets by severing relational rituals, the path forward requires designing systems that reintroduce witness at scale (Geiger & Ribes, 2011; Gillespie, 2018).

This calls for:

- Cross-disciplinary research uniting labor economics, sociology, platform studies, and human-computer interaction to measure the market effects of emotional fragmentation (Bail, 2021; Tufekci, 2014).
- Institutional interventions — including transparency mandates and standardized closure signals — to make hiring markets legible again (Rahman, 2022).

- Infrastructure innovation through decentralized trust layers, user-driven review systems, and peer validation tools that restore shared meaning and belonging (Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002; Kenney & Zysman, 2016).

These reforms are not about making platforms “nicer” — they are about making them structurally viable. A market cannot function when its participants cannot see one another, cannot interpret outcomes, and cannot collectively generate trust.

Without emotional scaffolding, the market collapses under its own noise.

Closing Reflection

Principle 6 formalizes a claim long sensed but rarely measured: human systems are economic systems (Collins, 2004; Akerlof, 1970).

Digital platforms imagined they could abstract labor into metrics while leaving the relational fabric behind. Instead, they revealed that emotional fragmentation produces economic fragmentation — and that restoring belonging, visibility, and peer witness is not peripheral to fixing labor markets; it is the fix (Gray & Suri, 2019; Srnicek, 2017).

If the previous principles mapped the gravitational pull of platforms, Principle 6 names the hidden atmosphere holding the system together:

- When we dismantle it, markets drift into incoherence.
- When we restore it, adaptive equilibrium — and dignity — become possible again

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